

# FARMINGTON POLICE DEPARTMENT

## POLICY AND PROCEDURE



**Policy Number:**  
241-16

**Effective Date:**  
12/20/2017

**Subject:**  
Missing Children

**Approved by:**

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "S.D. Hebbe".

**Steven D. Hebbe, Chief of Police**



### PURPOSE:

The purpose of this policy is to establish responsibilities and guidelines for the department's response to reports of missing, abducted, runaway, and abandoned children.

### POLICY:

It is the policy of the Farmington Police Department to expeditiously respond to and thoroughly investigate all reports of missing, abducted, runaway, and abandoned children. A child who is missing under unusual circumstances shall be considered at risk until sufficient information to the contrary is confirmed.

### PROCEDURE:

#### Definitions:

**Missing Child:** This term refers to a person who is (1) younger than 18 years of age, and (2) whose whereabouts are unknown to the child's parents, guardian or responsible party under circumstances that are uncustomary for the child or that would cause reasonable concern.

**Abandoned Child:** This term refers to a person who is (1) younger than 18 years of age, and (2) whose primary caretaker has deserted the child without any regards to the child's health, physical safety, or welfare; or whose primary caretaker has failed to provide necessary care for a child living in their household.

**Runaway:** This term refers to a person who is (1) younger than 18 years of age, and (2) whose whereabouts is unknown to the person's primary caretaker, and (3) the circumstance of the person's absence indicate that the person voluntarily left the care and control of the primary caretaker with the primary caretaker's consent without the intention to return.

**Unusual Circumstances:** For purposes of this policy, the term unusual circumstances refers to a missing child who is 17 years of age or younger, and whose disappearance involves circumstances that would cause a reasonable person to conclude that the child should be considered at risk. Those circumstances may include the child being:

1. Out of the zone of safety for his or her age and/or developmental stage;
2. Mentally incapacitated (e.g., developmentally disabled or emotionally disturbed);

3. Medically dependent (e.g., insulin dependent);
4. Drug involved;
5. A potential victim of foul play or sexual exploitation;
6. In a life-threatening situation;
7. Reported to the police as missing after a delay on the part of the parents, guardians, or other responsible person;
8. Believed to be with adults or older juveniles who could endanger the child's welfare; and/or;
9. Absent under circumstances inconsistent with established patterns of behavior.

**Zone of Safety:**

The distance a child could travel from the location where last seen before the child would most likely be at risk of injury or exploitation based on the child's age, developmental stage, and related matters.

**Responsibilities of the Call Taker:**

A call taker who receives the report of a missing child or runaway is responsible for ensuring that appropriate information is collected to assist the responding officer. This includes, but may not be limited to, the following:

1. Determine if the circumstances of the report meet the definition of a missing child as noted earlier in this policy;
2. Prioritize the call based on the factors determining unusual circumstances and dispatch officers accordingly;
3. Collect essential information from the caller to transmit appropriate radio alerts providing descriptive information about the child, where the child was last seen, and any information concerning potential abductors and their means and direction of travel;
4. Inform the parent or guardian that they should not disturb or tamper with the home, school, or location where the child might have been or any of the child's belongings;
5. Where possible and appropriate, search policy agency records for information that may facilitate the search and investigation. This may include records of incidents reported in the vicinity that may have some bearing on the case, including but not limited to:
  - a. Complaints of attempted abductions, prowlers, public lewdness, and suspicious person;
  - b. Residents in the vicinity of the missing child's home or place last seen who are designated as sexual predators or convicted sex offenders;
  - c. History of household abuse or domestic violence calls;
  - d. Criminal history of family members or others at the child's home address;

- e. Runaway reports on the child or siblings; and;
  - f. Juvenile delinquency reports of the child or siblings.
6. Safeguard all pertinent records for future investigative reference, to include communications related to the incident, written notes, radio broadcasts, and all subsequent notifications;
  7. Where unusual circumstances exist, issue a radio alert to all agency personnel and enter an alert on the statewide telecommunications system;
  8. Ask the parents to stay in place until police personnel arrive.

A call taker who receives the report of a found child is responsible for ensuring the appropriate information is collected to assist the responding officer. This information may include, but is not limited to the following;

1. Location of the found child,
2. Age and description of child,
3. Health or other concerns concerning the safety of the child,
4. Identification of reporting party,

The call taker should review recent calls and look for future calls concerning missing children that could be related to the same child.

### **Responsibilities of the First Responder:**

The officer assigned as a first responder for a call concerning a missing child or runaway should prioritize and perform as appropriate the following tasks:

1. Unless acting in direct response to the child's safety, respond directly and promptly to the individual who made the initial report;
2. Irrespective of any search that may have been conducted previously by parents or others, verify that the child is missing by conducting a consensual search of the house and grounds to include places where the child could be hiding, trapped or asleep;
3. Conduct interviews with the parent(s) or other person who made the initial report in order to gain insight into the circumstances surrounding the disappearance and gather other information needed to conduct an initial assessment of the case;
4. Obtain a detailed description of the missing child, along with recent photographs and/or videotapes of the child, when possible;
5. Confirm the child's custody status, whether a custody dispute or similar problem exists between the parents, whether a restraining order is in effect, or if the child has expressed an interest in living with the non-custodial parent;

6. Determine when, where and by whom the child was last seen; interview those who last saw the child and treat the location as a crime scene;
7. Secure and safeguard the incident scene as a potential crime scene. Where possible, take photographs and/or videotape of the incident scene, and ensure that personnel do not tamper with potential evidence;
8. Identify any areas of the incident scene or the home that have been disrupted since the child's disappearance. In particular, the child's bedroom, bed clothing, and related areas and items should be secured and protected until evidence and identification material such as hair, fingerprints, or bite marks can be collected. Also determine the child's accessibility to computers and/or the internet and ensure appropriate personnel examine any computers accessed by the child prior to disappearance;
9. Identify the zone of safety for the child's age and developmental stage;
10. Based on available information, make an initial determination of the type of case, the need for additional resources, and whether the incident should be initially classified as unusual as defined in this policy. Where a child is missing under unusual circumstances, a supervisor will be notified;
11. If the child was abducted, obtain a description of the abductors if available, the mode of travel, vehicle description, and related information, and transmit to the communications center. If the abductor is a family member, obtain photographs of the suspect when possible;
12. In the event of a child abduction, determine the appropriateness of issuing an [Amber Alert in compliance with department policy \(#354-02\)](#);
13. Determine the correct NCIC Missing Person File category (disability, endangered, involuntary, juvenile, or catastrophe) and request that the communications center or other authorized personnel promptly enter this into the NCIC file. Family abductions are normally entered as involuntary, and non-family abductions are entered as endangered;
14. Fully identify and separately interview anyone at the scene of the disappearance;
15. A thorough home search should be conducted even if the child's disappearance occurred elsewhere. Obtain written or audio taped permission to conduct the search and, with the assistance of additional personnel, search the residence, any out-buildings, and other structures, vehicles, and related property;
16. Prepare a chronological account of actions taken and information obtained from point of contact to relief.

The officer assigned as a first responder for a call concerning a found/abandoned child should perform the following tasks:

1. Attempt to obtain as much information from the child in regards to the child's home address, school, and primary caretaker information;
2. Attempt to identify and contact the child's primary caretaker;
3. Determine if the primary caretaker is capable of caring for the child.

If the officer is unable to identify or contact the primary caretaker, or it is determined that the primary caretaker is unable to properly care for the child the officer will then attempt to identify and contact another adult family

member of the child who is capable and willing to care for the child. Prior to releasing the child to anyone other than the primary caretaker, the officer shall contact Children, Youth, and Families Division's Statewide Central Intake (SCI) and completes a background check on that person. Any previous child, domestic violence, or sexual related crime, that person will be disqualified as a potential caretaker for the child.

If the officer is unable to locate any person willing and able to care for the child, the officer will contact Childhaven in order to place the child. The officer will notify the on duty supervisor and advise them of the situation and its resolution.

In all cases of an abandoned child, the officer will file a report with CYFD through SCI.

### **Responsibilities of the Supervisor:**

Where a child is missing under unusual circumstances, a supervisor will ensure that the following measures are taken:

1. Obtain a briefing from the first responder and other agency personnel at the scene sufficient to determine the scope and complexity of the case and develop an appropriate response. Conduct the briefing away from family, friends, and other involved individuals;
2. Ensure that first responder responsibilities, as outlined in this policy, have been fully and properly carried out;
3. Determine if additional personnel and resources are needed to assist in the investigation, to include activation of inter-agency response protocols;
4. If necessary, establish a command post (away from the child's residence) to assist in field management of the search and investigation;
5. Appoint a search operations coordinator to organize any search efforts. Determine whether tracking dogs are available and if they are appropriate for use under the immediate circumstances;
6. Appoint a media liaison if not yet on hand to deal with media inquiries and, if deemed appropriate, solicit media assistance in locating the missing child;
7. Ensure that all required notifications have been made to include, where appropriate, officers and investigative units of the department, other law enforcement agencies, and available community resources;
8. Establish a liaison with the child's family who can explain police efforts and work with the family to uncover any information useful to the investigation;
9. Assess the need for additional services and, when deemed appropriate, contact the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (1-800-843-5678) to determine what services, if any, can be provided.

### **Responsibilities of the Detective:**

Where a case involves unusual circumstances as defined in this policy, the assigned detective shall ensure that the following measures are taken:

1. Obtain a briefing from department personnel already familiar with the incident;
2. Verify the accuracy of all descriptive information concerning the child, being alert to facts or statements that may conflict with those obtained by the first responder or supervisor;
3. Canvas the neighborhood as soon as possible to identify and interview residents and others within the abduction zone. Identify all vehicles parked within the neighborhood;
4. Obtain a general history of recent family dynamics from family members, neighbors, classmates, teachers, school counselors, or any other persons who may have had close personal interaction with the child and/or family;
5. Conduct in-depth fact-finding interviews with all witnesses and relevant friends, relatives, teachers, classmates, etc. of the missing child, who knew and/or routinely interacted with the child, placing particular emphasis on identifying any conflicting information offered by these or other individuals;
6. Review any pertinent records generated about the family or child from the police agency, social services agencies, schools, and related organizations or agencies;
7. Reassess the need for additional resources and specialized services, to include search and rescue operations, the New Mexico State Missing Children's Clearinghouse, and federal agencies such as the FBI and the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children;
8. If the case is not resolved promptly, update descriptive records and those entered into state and federal missing persons databases to include dental characteristics, scars, marks and tattoos, fingerprints, and additional articles of clothing, jewelry, or possessions not previously itemized;
9. Monitor media relations to include a review of all agency releases to the media to ensure that information is not released that will compromise the investigation;
10. Provide the child's family with whatever support is possible and appropriate (i.e., referral to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children for a copy of the Family Survival Guide prepared by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.)

### **Unidentified Children:**

An officer who is assigned to the report of an unidentified person who appears to be a child, whether living or deceased, is responsible for completion of the following tasks, among other responsibilities:

1. Obtain a complete description of the individual;
2. Enter the child's description into the NCIC Unidentified Person File;
3. Utilize available resources to identify the child, to include:

- a. The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children;
  - b. State missing and exploited children clearinghouses; and
  - c. State medical examiner's offices and organizations.
4. Once identification has been made, cancel all notifications.

**Recovery and/or Case Closure:**

Missing Children shall not be removed from NCIC until their identity is verified in person by a law enforcement officer. An officer assigned to the recovery or return of a missing child shall complete the following tasks, among other responsibilities:

1. Verify the identity of the returned child as the missing child, while assessing the child's safety and gather available information about possible predators;
2. During the verification process, determine whether intervention services are needed to ensure that the child can safely remain in the home and ensure that arrangements are made for delivery of these services. These include, but are not limited to, mental health and/or physical health examinations and arrangements for family counseling;
3. Complete appropriate supplemental reports and cancel all outstanding notifications, to include any NCIC Missing Person File entry and the state clearinghouse. Supplemental reports should describe the child's activities while missing and the circumstances of the recovery/return.